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TENNYSON'S FRIENDSHIPS

Reading the poetry of Alfred Tennyson, one is impressed by the warmth and purity of tone of those verses especially dedicated to the great laureate's friends. A gossip-loving world, which catches gladly upon the legend of General Washington's reported profanity to Lee at Monmouth, has characteristically made much of a certain story of Tennyson's 'bearishness' and magnified his long-continued retirement from the world at large into something approaching a confirmed dislike for all men. As a matter of fact, it was sensitiveness which lay behind both of these traits, a lifelong sensitiveness, about which he came to set up, as a sort of shield, a gruffness of tone and manner really wholly foreign to him, for at heart he was almost feminine in his tenderness. Born of this tenderness, and in spite of the sensitiveness, he was possessed of a something which might almost warrant the phrase "genius for friendship." His intimacies were as few as are those of all great men, but there were many who stood near to him throughout his long career, as if to evidence Charles Darwin's dictum that the duration of any man's friendships is the best measure of his worth. With no business connections to engender petty littlenesses, and no political partisanship to breed rivalries, this poet, whom Stopford Brooke has called "the most perfect blossom of modern British letters," as if realizing that he had come into the world to convince it of the eternal truth of love and beauty, gave himself large-heartedly to all who entered closely into his life, exemplifying in these relations of "the daily come-and-go," as in his writings, the unconscious but consistent call of a deep affection.

This was true from his first days to his last; from those early years at the Somersby rectory, just turned of a century ago, on till the long road had wound past its eighty-third milestone, as season followed season in Epping Forest, at Tunbridge Wells, in great gray London, on the Thames at Twickenham, down in Farringford, and at the splendid country seat at Aldworth, Surrey; till at length the man was carried to his long rest beside

Robert Browning and before the tomb of Chaucer. The very names of the pallbearers who bore the dead poet into the Abbey, that October day in '92, are suggestive of the range of the man's attachments: the Duke of Argyll and the historian Froude; Lord Dufferin and the "Grecian" Jowett; Salisbury and the philosopher Lecky; Selbourn and Robert T. Lincoln, then American Ambassador at St. James, with Lord Rosebery to add yet more to statecraft and scholarship, and Lord Kelvin to represent the achievements of natural science. All had shared Tennyson's friendships.

The poet's friends ranged from old to young. On the one hand stood Leigh Hunt, who had so highly praised that early verse which appeared in type in 1830; and the veteran actor Macready, to whom, on his retirement, Tennyson wrote one of his finest sonnets; and the banker-poet Rogers, to whose refusal of the laureateship upon the death of Wordsworth he owed his own elevation to the bays and the perch of canary. On the other were such young men (then) as Frederick Harrison, Charles Stuart Calverley, and the late Algernon Swinburne, who called upon the older singer in the Isle of Wight in 1858, to be writ down as "a modest and intelligent young man;" a half dozen years later, Tennyson declared the *Atalanta in Calydon* "strong and splendid," "one of the finest pieces of poetic craftsmanship" he had ever enjoyed.

Many-sided as he himself was, it was but natural that Tennyson in his fellowships should have included all interests in life. From the year of Victoria's accession to his own final illness, he was bound close to the "Grand Old Man," Gladstone, who some four or five months his junior, shared with him his birth-year as well as many of his interests; it was through Gladstone that he was raised to the peerage eight years before his death. He took more than one trip at sea on Lord Brassey's "Sunbeam," and for years exchanged letters with Huxley and Darwin. In addition to Macready, his friendships with those of the foot-light world included the Kembles, who brought out *The Falcon* at the St. James Theatre in December, '79, and Henry Irving, who, from the time of his production of *Queen Mary* at the Lyceum in '76, was constantly and intimately associated with

the great poet-playwright. In the realm of art Tennyson had warm regard for Watts and Millais, each of whom painted his portrait, while the latter joined with the late Holman Hunt and Rossetti in illustrating the collected poems which appeared in the mid fifties.

To these must be added, of course, most of the great names of contemporary British Letters. With the Brownings he enjoyed most intimate relations, saw not a little of Lewis Morris, and much of Ruskin and Carlyle, grievously disappointing the latter, by the way, when he turned his splendid gifts to the telling of the Arthurian legends, instead of dedicating them, as the "Sage of Chelsea" would have had him do, to ends purely didactic and ethical. Carlyle's description of the poet bears repeating: "A fine, large-featured, dim-eyed, bronze-colored, shaggy-bearded man; dusty, smoky, free and easy,"—and the 'smoky' inevitably recalls the story which Jane Carlyle used to tell of that evening when her husband and Tennyson sat for three hours silent in the basement kitchen of the "eminent, antique" house on Cheyne Row,—smoking always and talking not at all. It well bears out Mrs. Craik's "true test for friendship"—"to sit in perfect silence, without wearying of one another's company." On the night in question, the guest is said to have taken a tardy departure with the laconic, "Well, it's been a pleasant evening."

The novelists Dickens and Thackeray shared this fellowship, and the poets Palgrave and Patmore,—Palgrave, who turned to Tennyson so often for advice when compiling his *Treasury*, and Patmore ("mystical lyrist of *The Angel of the House*"), who recovered for the world the invaluable manuscript of *In Memoriam*, which the author had left in a provision closet in some London chambers. He wrote back to Patmore of the oversight, but the landlady in question assured the inquiring caller that there was nothing on those shelves, and the precious roll of papers was found only when insistence had beaten down a first and second rebuff.

Such a chronicle as this should begin with the poet's Cambridge days; he himself once said that the intimacies of those undergraduate years had done far more to school his heart than

had the old university itself. Tennyson, a youth of nineteen, entered Trinity College when Dr. Christopher Wordsworth was Master; the Carlyles were just then setting up housekeeping at Craigenputtock. Three years later, he left without taking a degree; Charlotte Brontë was then painfully gathering her material for *Shirley* at Roe Head. Trinity, which had mothered Newton and Bacon, Dryden and Herbert, Cowley and Byron, fostered during those brief months of Alfred and Charles Tennyson's studies a little secret society called 'The Apostles,' the members of which, besides the brothers from "the nest of nightingales" at Somersby, were Brookfield, Trench (destined, when Dublin's Archbishop, to write charmingly of the romances that lie behind everyday words), Arthur Hallam, Alford, one day to be Canterbury's dean as well as poet, and Monckton Milnes. The last named, even before he had achieved the title of Baron Houghton, did Tennyson realest service, for when Sir Robert Peel, then Premier, had at his disposal a government pension of some \$1,000 a year and was hesitating upon whom he should bestow it, Milnes read aloud to him his comrade's *Ulysses*, which settled the matter in the writer's favor. Milnes, too, and Hallam competed with Tennyson, in those Cambridge days, for the Chancellor's Medal, and were worsted by his *Timbuctoo*.

Four others of his university associates were F. D. Maurice, Merivale, son of the historian; Charles Buller and J. R. Spedding, the one to go so soon into public life and the other to become the editor of Bacon. The influence of the first-named capacious and fertile, if somewhat vague, mind is constantly to be seen in the *In Memoriam*. It may well be added, too, that Maurice and Henry Hallam, the historian father of the short-lived son, stood godfathers to Hallam Tennyson, when he appeared in the world in 1852.

It was between Arthur Hallam and Tennyson, however, that the fondest and warmest bond of attachment existed, though that friendship was to last but a half dozen years. Not long after his engagement to the poet's sister, young Hallam died in Vienna (September, 1833), and after seventeen years of loving labor, with its many "short swallow-flights of song, that dip

their wings in tears and skim away," came *In Memoriam* to immortalize both dead and living, and to take stand, beside *Lycidas* and *Adonais*, as one of the world's greatest elegiac poems. Victoria preferred this "Book of Job of the Nineteenth Century" to all save the Bible, and it was unquestionably this noble tribute of a noble affection which, more than any one thing, placed the Laureate's mantle about the shoulders of the elegist.

If the Cambridge years bound together this group of notables with the common tie of their regard for Tennyson and his for them, so there came, a decade later, a second period not dissimilar in the fellowships which resulted. Soon after the publication of the poems of '24, including *The Lotus Eaters* and *Locksley Hall*, whose undulating lines "glitter like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a golden braid," Tennyson, then in London, was elected to the chosen few who formed the "Annoymous Club," was made warmly welcome in the brilliant circle at Holland House, among such as Moore and Macaulay, Rogers and Watts; while the hostess of "Bath House" ("with the soul of a princess and captiveness") was bringing together in Mayfair such as Carlyle and Froude and Browning and Tennyson.

It was about this same time that a pleasant little note of the future laureate's suggests the name of yet another friend, Edward Fitzgerald. Written in '47,—the twelve-month of the initial appearances of *Jane Eyre* and *Tancred* and *Vanity Fair*,—this epistle runs:

My dear Fitz:—Ain't I a beast for not answering you before? Not that I am going to write now, only to tell you that I have seen Carlyle more than once, and that I have been sojourning at 42 Ebury Street for some twenty days or so, and that I am going to bolt as soon as ever I can, and that I would go to Italy if I could get anybody to go with me, which I can't, and so I suppose I shan't go, which makes me hate myself and all the world. For the rest I have been dined *usque ad nauseam*. However, this night I have sent an excuse to Mrs. Procter, and here I am alone, and wish you were with me. My book is out and I hate it, and so no doubt will you; never mind, you will like me none the worse, and now good night. I am knocked up and going to bed.

"My book" was *The Princess*, that romantic medley of the England of Victoria, superimposed on a background of the England of Richard Cœur de Lion, written in a blank verse soft and gorgeous, broken now and again by some of the most perfect lyrics in the language, those intercalary songs which fall "between the rougher voices of the men, like linnets in the pauses of the wind."

The intimate relations between Tennyson and "the shiest of all literary celebrities," as Dr. Nicoll calls Fitzgerald, though the two had been at Cambridge together, began some five years after Tennyson had left Trinity. It was in '35 that they visited together at Spedding's home in the lake country, and Fitzgerald has left record of how the latest teller of the "Morte d'Arthur" read to them from his "little red book," claiming that he had to interpret his own poems, as their host, when he tried to read aloud, enunciated "as though he had a mouth full of bees." Resting on their oars on the bosom of Windermere, Tennyson declaimed *The Gardner's Daughter* and *The Day Dream*:

Nine years she wrought it, sitting in the deeps,
Upon the hidden bases of the hills.

"Not bad, that, Fitz, is it?" was the writer's comment.

At this time Fitzgerald was greeting every expression of the genius of the laureate-to-be with an outburst of joy which must have delighted the heart of that sensitive poet. So highly did he rank the promise of his friend, indeed, that he was constantly predicting some monumental work soon to come, and so, as the *Idylls* began to appear, this scholarly eccentric, who, like Carlyle, took no least interest in the love tales of chivalry, felt keenly disappointed. At first he thought *The Princess* smacked a little with "the old champagne flavor," but he soon cooled toward it. *In Memoriam* quite failed to appeal to him; he wrote of it to Frederick Tennyson: "It is full of the finest things, but it is monotonous, and has an air of being evolved by a mere poetical machine, albeit of the highest order." To the end he held that Tennyson never added materially to his fame after the poems which appeared in '42, and lamented that the poet had been obscured by the artist:—"He has lost that which caused the long roll of the Lincolnshire wave to reverberate in

Locksley Hall." Eventually (and naturally) Tennyson ceased to submit his manuscript for Fitz's criticism, whereupon those criticisms, made upon the printed pages, became more and more harsh. In spite of all this, let it be added, Fitzgerald was ever an ardent admirer of Tennyson, while Tennyson's tenderest side was ever turned toward "dear old Fitz." One of the most sympathetic pieces of dedicatory writing in the language is that which inscribed the volume *Tiresias* to Fitzgerald's memory in 1885, two years after he had been laid to rest in the Boule churchyard, under the Nashaipur rosebush.

"The personal Tennyson," to quote the phrase of those who would build up a controversy about the subject, was far indeed removed from anything which meant "all things to all men," but he was a good friend to his friends and they were many. An off-hand comment which appears in a letter of Thackeray's to Mrs. Procter, may be added in final proof of this,—and it is to be remembered that the novelist knew Tennyson from the early days at Cambridge, where, indeed, Thackeray had written a good-natured parody of the *Timbuctoo* prize poem. He wrote:

Alfred Tennyson, if he can't make you like him (though he almost invariably does that, when he has a mind) will make you admire him. He seems to me to have the *cachet* of a great man. His conversation is delightful; full of breath, manliness and humor; he reads all sorts of things, swallows them, and digests them like a great poetical boa-constrictor, as he is. Perhaps it is the great big yellow face and the growling voice that have made an impression on me; manliness and simplicity go a great way with me, I fancy.

And manliness and simplicity were the key notes of the Tennysonian friendships.

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